

# Merging IO and PSYOP

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This article represents my personal observations and opinions and does not reflect the official views of U.S. Special Operations Command, the PSYOP community, or the U.S. Army.

“Isolated communities of personnel should begin to think of themselves as IO personnel rather than personnel participating in a core component of IO”  
– Department of Defense Information Operations Roadmap, October 2003.

I propose merging the Information Operations (IO) Functional Area and the Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Branch into one specialty under the umbrella term, *Information Operations*. Combining resources, training, and ultimately functions can only help the overall effort in the Department of Defense to wage the “Information War.” For instance, Army IO officers receive PSYOP-like training in the art of influence and marketing, while both communities are competing for scarce personnel resources. Another dilemma is that “PSYOP” has an image problem, while “Information Operations” is a universally accepted and non-threatening term. Instead of competing, the Army can create a better IO officer, culturally trained, and well grounded in marketing and influence (because he is a PSYOP officer), that understands all the elements of IO. Some argue that we just need to change the name of PSYOP because it is associated with propaganda, lying, and misinformation, but they are missing the larger issue. What we actually need is a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize Information Operations.

## Elements of Information Operations

There seems to be a lot of confusion in the Army as to the exact nature of IO. Under current doctrine, IO consists of five elements: Computer Network Operations (CNO), Electronic Warfare (EW), Military Deception (MILDEC), Operations Security (OPSEC), and Psychological Operations (PSYOP). It has been my experience that the Navy and Air Force have most of the CNO and EW expertise. During my three years (2002-2005) in the IO section at U.S. Central Command, almost all of the CNO and EW officers that I worked with in the headquarters and in our subordinate units came from the Air Force and Navy. All the Services practice OPSEC and MILDEC at some level. The two are in some ways opposites of each other – securing information about our own capabilities, plans, and operations; while, at certain times, deceiving the enemy about the same. The Army’s biggest contribution by far to Information Operations with respect to the five elements of IO is PSYOP. About 5000 Army PSYOP soldiers comprise one active duty and two reserve PSYOP Groups, and the Joint PSYOP Support Element (JPSE)<sup>i</sup>, as well as fill various staff positions in both conventional and Special Operations Forces (SOF) units. The active duty officer corps of the PSYOP Branch is around 200; about the same as the number of active duty IO officers in the Army.

## Confusing Terms

Time and again we hear military commanders refer to traditional PSYOP activities and products as “IO.” How many times have you heard something to this effect? “Let’s conduct an IO campaign by dropping IO leaflets on the enemy to influence him to surrender.” Our leaders don’t seem to want to use the term PSYOP. This could be a lack of understanding of the term or perhaps it’s negative association with propaganda<sup>ii</sup>. More likely, the term “Information Operations” has been so widely used in and outside the military that it has become the common term for using information to influence. If our leaders are going to call it “Information Operations,” then perhaps that is what we should name it. “Information” certainly has a less threatening sound than “psychological.” We already call PSYOP teams in support of U.S. Embassies: Military “Information” Support Teams (MISTs)<sup>iii</sup>.

If we aren’t confused enough between the definitions of PSYOP and IO, there is the new and evolving concept of Strategic Communication... which no one seems to be able to define let alone practice! I find it interesting that everyone is having such consternation with the concept of Strategic Communication. Most define it in terms of information and actions designed to influence at the Strategic level. Based on this definition, I maintain that Strategic Communication is nothing more than PSYOP at the Strategic level<sup>iv</sup>.

Some argue that the PSYOP community has a perception problem. One of the SOF imperatives is to “ensure the legitimacy and credibility of Special Operations (SO).”<sup>v</sup> “Without legitimacy and credibility, SO will not gain the support of foreign indigenous elements, the U.S. population, or the international community.” If the PSYOP community is losing its credibility or has a perception problem, we must fix this.

Numerous military officers are writing articles for our professional journals that discuss IO and Strategic Communication and how to influence foreign audiences. Unfortunately, they also confuse the various terms. For example, the recent Military Review article: “Marketing: An Overlooked Aspect of Information Operations,” which was written by two officers with first-hand experience of Information Operations at the Tactical level write, “Information operations have the same goal as marketing communications: to influence a target audience to respond positively to a message.”<sup>vi</sup> Clearly they are talking about PSYOP. However, this particular article completely neglects the PSYOP discipline. “A significant shortfall in military operations continues to be insufficient knowledge about the local populace and how to influence it.”<sup>vii</sup> “The Army should acquire skilled marketing professionals by ... providing marketing training for military IO practitioners.”<sup>viii</sup> As the saying goes, perception is reality. If those who served at Battalion, Brigade, and Division level do not see the “marketing” expertise, then it isn’t getting done well. Perhaps the PSYOP community has failed at explaining the discipline to the rest of the Army. Is it a wonder that we are losing relevance?

## Migration of Psychological Operations Roles

Psychological Operations units and soldiers have five traditional roles<sup>ix</sup>:

- 1) influence foreign audiences
- 2) advise the commander on the psychological effects of actions and operations
- 3) provide public information to foreign audiences
- 4) serve as the commander's voice to foreign populations
- 5) counter enemy propaganda

Of these, the PSYOP community conducts roles # 1 and # 3 fairly well. Although, it seems many in the upper echelons of the Department of Defense are trying to box the PSYOP community into tactical operations only: face-to-face and loudspeaker communications; and making print, radio, and to some extent TV products. The other roles are more often being performed by others.

It is not apparent that anyone really understands counter propaganda (role # 5) or conducts it very well. Our leaders often react to what they hear in intelligence reports or see on TV about information products that "the enemy" has disseminated. They want to know immediately what we are going to say in response. This "direct refutation"<sup>x</sup> is only one form of counter propaganda and often not the best counter. We neglect the analysis that can determine the best way to counter propaganda. Because of the lack of ability to perform role # 2 (advise the commander on the psychological effects of actions and operations), PSYOP officers and NCOs cannot provide adequate counter propaganda expertise to their commanders.

The PSYOP community has abrogated role # 2 to the IO/Strategic Communication function and role # 4 to the Public Affairs community. It has been my experience that PSYOP officers rarely get to talk directly to commanders. Communication usually goes through the IO Officer or Strategic Communications Officer to the Operations Officer or Chief of Staff, and then to the Commander. It has also been my experience that commanders talk directly to foreign populations without the aid of PSYOP units. Over the past four years I have witnessed Battalion, Brigade, and Division commanders using their Public Affairs officers to help them speak directly to Iraqis via public and private meetings, radio broadcasts, and press conferences without the need for PSYOP units to help them. Brigades have even commandeered radio stations and run them. Now, Strategic Communication (or Effects)<sup>xi</sup> staff sections are coming to the fore in all the COCOMs. They sometimes consist of converted IO sections or, worse, a bunch of non-communication trained (i.e. PSYOP or Public Affairs) officers cobbled together. It is these sections, coupled with their Public Affairs counterparts that perform the traditional PSYOP roles of advising commanders on the effects of actions and operations and serving as the commander's voice to foreign populations. Commanders usually defer IO issues to the IO Officer, even if they are PSYOP related. Why? Because IO officers have planning and supervisory responsibility for all the five IO disciplines, and, as I have discussed, commanders think in terms of IO and not PSYOP.

## Competition between IO and PSYOP

PSYOP as we know is about influence, specifically marketing. The IO career field is moving into this area. The nine-week IO Qualification Course includes instruction in marketing, culture, and negotiation. The FA30<sup>xii</sup> (IO Officer) recruiting brochure lists unique knowledge and attributes of the IO officer:

- possess specific marketing and international media skills
- plan, prepare, and execute influence activities
- cross-cultural communications and cultural awareness
- besides having face-to-face engagements skills using translators for the simple purpose of communications, they [IO officers] must understand and be prepared to apply their cultural awareness and human factors throughout the full spectrum of operations – strategic to tactical levels.<sup>xiii</sup>

Compare this to the unique features of the PSYOP officer as listed in DA Pam 600-3.

- Psychological Operations officers possess expertise in assessing foreign target audiences, developing PSYOP plans, programs and products, disseminating PSYOP products, and synchronizing PSYOP activities in peacetime and combat operations.
- PSYOP officers must maintain proficiency in critical skills associated with a specific region of the world to include foreign language competence, political-military awareness, and cross-cultural communications.
- Conducting PSYOP requires interaction with host nation military, civilian officials, the general populace, displaced civilians, and internees; as well as interagency coordination within the U.S. government.<sup>xiv</sup>

It seems these “marketing” skills are no longer the sole purview of the PSYOP community. IO officers are being encouraged to obtain Masters degrees in Public Relations and other related academic disciplines (like Marketing and International Relations) similar to PSYOP officers. Both the IO and PSYOP officer communities are short personnel and competing for scarce personnel resources. The Army is assigning both communities’ officers in the same units and sections. Why do we need both an IO and PSYOP Lieutenant Colonel at a Division, or a Major at a Brigade or Special Forces Group?

The Secretary of Defense has mandated that functional components of IO, like PSYOP, merge into one field. So why are the two communities still separate? Excerpts from the DOD Information Operations Roadmap.<sup>xv</sup>

The complexity and technological growth in EW, PSYOP and CNO tend to isolate the specialists who practice these disciplines from one another ... (p. 32) To be successful, an IO career force will have to break some cultural norms. Isolated communities of personnel [*read PSYOP*] should begin to think of themselves as IO personnel rather than personnel participating in a core component of IO [*read PSYOP*]. (p. 33)

Recommendation: Develop IO capability specialists. (p. 34)

- IO capability specialists are functional experts in one or more of the highly specialized core capabilities of CNO, EW, or PSYOP.
- IO capability specialists should serve alternating tours between their specialized core capability and assignments as IO planners. [*i.e. PSYOP officers / NCOs should serve in IO billets*]
- IO capability specialists should possess specialized expertise on a certain IO core capability, but gain experience in the planning and execution of the broader construct of IO.

## Conclusion

The time has come to merge the Information Operations Functional Area and the Psychological Operations Branch. The PSYOP community has a perception problem. General Officers and other commanders refer to PSYOP activities as simply “IO.” Examining Army IO and PSYOP literature shows many parallels between the two specialties. Both communities are competing for scarce personnel resources. The Army stands to gain many benefits with negligible adverse effects through such a merger. The Army will achieve economies of scale by not doubling IO and PSYOP officers in the same unit. IO officers will gain better marketing and cultural training as well as become members of a Branch. PSYOP officers will gain better access to commanders. The IO force will also gain enlisted members and an NCO corps from the PSYOP community. All of this will ultimately improve the professionalism and technical expertise of the new Information Operation soldiers.

“Blasphemy!”

“The IO (or PSYOP) community will never go for it.”

“Oh my gosh ... we can’t change, that’s too hard!”

You have heard all the complaints, all the challenges, all the issues. I believe it is time to put these aside and solve an issue that began in the Army over ten years ago in the formative stages of IO. The PSYOP community passed up the opportunity to become the nucleus of the Army IO community. Now ten years later we have two competing groups in the Army that are responsible for portions of IO. It is time for the Army PSYOP and IO communities to merge.

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<sup>i</sup> The JPSE is a relatively new organization assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command’s (SOCOM). It has approximately 60 assigned personnel; about half civilian.

<sup>ii</sup> The term “propaganda” actually does not have a negative connotation. It originated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1600s and meant a congregation for propagating the faith. Webster’s Dictionary defines propaganda as: 1) “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person.” And 2) “ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause.” <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/propaganda>, accessed 27 October 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> “MIST: Small footprint big impact.” Tip of the Spear. June 2006. p. 13.

<sup>iv</sup> “**Strategic PSYOP** are international information activities conducted by US Government (USG) agencies to influence foreign attitudes, perceptions, and behavior in favor of US goals and objectives during peacetime and in times of conflict. These programs are conducted predominantly outside the military arena but can utilize Department of Defense (DOD) assets.” Joint Publication 3-53, Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations. 5 September 2003. p. ix.

<sup>v</sup> “**SOF Imperative: Ensure legitimacy and credibility of Special Operations**. Legitimacy is the most crucial factor in developing and maintaining internal and international support. The concept of legitimacy is broader than the strict legal definition contained in international law. The people of the nation and the international community determine its legitimacy based on collective perception of the credibility of its cause and methods. Without legitimacy and credibility, SO will not gain the support of foreign indigenous elements, the U.S. population, or the international community.” (FM 33.05.30, Psychological Operations, 15 Apr 05, p. 1-9 to 1-10)

<sup>vi</sup> Trent, Stoney, Captain U.S. Army, and Doty, James L. III, Captain U.S. Army. “Marketing: An Overlooked Aspect of Information Operations.” Military Review. Jul-Aug 05. p. 70.

<sup>vii</sup> Trent, p. 72.

<sup>viii</sup> Trent, p. 74.

<sup>ix</sup> Five traditional PSYOP roles (FM 3.05.30, Psychological Operations, 15 Apr 05, p. 1-3)

1. “*Influence foreign populations* by expressing information subjectively to influence attitudes and behavior, and to obtain compliance, noninterference, or other desired behavioral changes. These actions facilitate military operations, minimize needless loss of life and collateral damage, and further the objectives of the supported commander, the United States, and its allies.”

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2. “*Advise the commander* on PSYACTs, PSYOP enabling actions, and targeting restrictions that the military force may execute. These actions and restrictions minimize adverse impacts and unintended consequences, attack the enemy’s will to resist, and enhance successful mission accomplishment. PSYOP Soldiers also advise the commander on the psychological effects and consequences of other planned military actions and operations.”

3. “*Provide public information* to foreign populations to support humanitarian activities, restore or reinforce legitimacy, ease suffering, and maintain or restore civil order. Providing public information supports and amplifies the effects of other capabilities and activities such as civil-military operations (CMO).”

4. “*Serve as the supported commander’s voice* to foreign populations to convey intent and establish credibility. This ability allows the commander to reach more audiences with less expenditure in resources and time.”

5. “*Counter enemy propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and opposing information* to portray friendly intent and actions correctly and positively for foreign TAs, thus denying others the ability to polarize public opinion and political will against the United States and its allies.”

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Army doctrine lists several techniques to counter propaganda: direct refutation, indirect refutation, diversion, silence, restrictive measures, imitative deception, conditioning, forestalling, and minimization. FM 3-05.301, Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures, Dec 03, p. 11-22.

<sup>xi</sup> In many commands, the IO and/or Strategic Communications sections are called “Effects.”

<sup>xii</sup> FA30 is the Functional Area designation for Information Operations Officer. The designation for the PSYOP Officer Branch is 37.

<sup>xiii</sup> “FA 30 (IO) Brochure.” <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>. AKO Home > MACOMS > TRADOC > Information Ops > IO Training > Home. Accessed March 2006. As of October 2006, the link no longer exists. I can provide a copy of the brochure for those interested.

<sup>xiv</sup> DA Pam 600-3, Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management, 28 Dec 05, p. 313.

<sup>xv</sup> DOD Information Operations Roadmap, 30 Oct 2003. Excerpts are unclassified. Overall document is classified.)